

The Spokesman-Review (Spokane, WA)

EDITORIAL:

Exemplary leader: Gov. Otter would do well to follow Risch's model

McClatchy-Tribune Business News

January 5, 2007

The Spokesman-Review (MCT)

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Jan. 5--Until he was sworn into office as Idaho's 31st governor last May, Republican Jim Risch had little support in North Idaho.

The veteran southern Idaho politician had made two bad impressions on the region -- first, for working behind the scenes as a state senator to thwart plans for gaming compacts between the state and Idaho tribes; then, for beating Coeur d'Alene's Jack Riggs in the 2002 Republican primary race for lieutenant governor, a job Riggs held by appointment. Insiders also viewed Risch as an ambitious Machiavellian politician who'd do almost anything to become governor.

He got his chance in May when Gov. Dirk Kempthorne resigned to become the U.S. secretary of Interior.

Risch was anything but a caretaker governor. He traveled the state extensively. He accepted the heat for controversial decisions, big and little -- from spearheading property tax reform during an executive session to ordering escaped domestic elk killed to preserve the purity of Idaho's prized herds, from supporting congressional

1/10/2007

wilderness bills to opening offices in Coeur d'Alene and southeast Idaho.

As a result, Risch will be remembered not with an asterisk but as a dynamic, buck-stops-here governor in the mold of former Gov. Phil Batt. His willingness to address issues head-on -- such as rejecting plans for a coal-fired plant near Jerome for environmental reasons -- will be viewed fondly as a welcome departure from his predecessor's occasional indecisiveness. Risch also provided a measuring stick for new Gov. Butch Otter's first months in office.

Otter would do well to follow Risch's example in setting aside personal bias to build consensus for wilderness and environmental protection. Risch backed important wilderness initiatives, including a state plan to protect more than 8.6 million acres as roadless lands, and bills to create new wilderness in the Boulder-White Cloud Mountains and the Owyhee Canyonlands. Otter, by contrast, joined U.S. Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, in fighting other Idaho delegates over wilderness designations. Also, he has been cited three times by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for wetlands violations on his ranch near Star, Idaho.

Additionally, Otter would do well to follow Risch's lead in being open with the public. Again, there's little reason for optimism in this area.

While Risch seemed to be everywhere in the state and welcomed tough questions from reporters, Otter embraced a Rose Garden campaign strategy last fall, steering away from issues, the media and an important League of Women Voters debate. Former Rep. Otter raised further concerns about his openness on New Year's Day when he eschewed the public to be sworn into office as Idaho's 32nd governor in a private ceremony.

Long-time political observer Jim Weatherby said of that decision: "It does send a message as to how open his administration will be, whether intended or not."

In only seven months, Risch established his legacy as a very good Idaho governor. If Otter wants to do the same, he has an excellent model to follow.

Copyright (c) 2007, The Spokesman-Review, Spokane, Wash.

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribu